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ABSTRACT

University and college reading improvement teachers need a repertoire of techniques designed to guide carefully students' growth in developing independent comprehension strategies. Such strategies should avoid use of prepackaged commercial kits and collections of articles (content-simulated materials) and should stress the application by students of comprehension strategies directly to the narrative and expository materials that they are required to use in their academic course work. This approach facilitates transfer of instruction and prevents assumptive teaching often found in college reading improvement programs. One strategy for guiding growth in comprehension is the guided writing procedure, which is designed to encourage active comprehension and recall of content area material through a writing and discussion exercise. A second strategy is a brainstorming activity in developing content area vocabulary that emphasizes the active learning and retention of technical vocabulary from a content area unit. (Author/TJ)

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Guiding Comprehension in the Learning Assistance Setting

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Running head: Guiding Comprehension

Abstract

University and community college reading improvement teachers need a repertoire of techniques designed to carefully guide students' growth in developing independent comprehension strategies. Such strategies should avoid use of pre-packaged commerical kits and collections of articles (content-simulated materials) and stress the application by students of comprehension strategies directly to the narrative and expository materials which they are required to use in their academic course work. This approach facilitates transfer of instruction and prevents assumptive teaching often found in college reading improvement programs.

This paper introduces two strategies for guiding growth in comprehension: the guided writing procedure and a small group brainstorming activity for reinforcing technical, content-area vocabulary.

Research findings from psycholinguistics reveal two broad cognitive and linguistic factors that intersect to influence a reader's comprehension of written discourse. Recent accounts of the reading process by Pearson and Johnson (5) and Smith (8) contend that the richness of a reader's prior knowledge of a topic in combination with the semantic structure of a text are the two main factors that encourage or inhibit a reader's comprehension.

At the community college and university level these two psycholinguistic factors translate to prior knowledge of diverse subject areas and the ability to cope with technical vocabulary presented in expository text material of varying semantic structures (e.g. Drafting versus Psychology). Given the diversity of college subject area curriculum, it is ironic that the dominant methods and materials of reading improvement in structure are, as Basile (1) cogently indicated, so distant from the real demands of content area reading. Commercial kits and collections of narrative articles that attempt to simulate content reading tasks are the usual fare. General vocabulary terms like "gregarious" receive adequate attention while content area technical terms such as "photosynthesis" are largely ignored. Thus it becomes possible for a student to be highly successful in a reading improvement setting while simultaneously experiencing great difficulty in the content areas.

A more attractive approach to designing curriculum within the reading improvement setting involves the use of real content area concepts, text material, and vocabulary in combination with the development of more general reading skills. The first prerequisite for the development of a content-centered reading improvement program is communication with content area instructors. While it is not within the scope of this paper to provide step-by-step plans for this early stage of program development, previous discussions by Hubin (4), Silverston (6), and Tomlinson and Green (9) are good background sources. The intent of the present paper is to propose and demonstrate the use of two practical strategies for a content-centered reading improvement program.

The first strategy to be introduced is the guided writing procedure generated by Smith and Bean (7). The guided writing procedure (GWP) is designed to encourage active comprehension and recall of content area material.

The second strategy from Bean and Berrey (2) emphasizes the active learning and retention of technical vocabulary from a content area unit. Both teaching strategies are predicated on the important psycholinguistic factors of prior knowledge and the semantic structure of text material.

The Guided Writing Procedure

The guided writing procedure (GWP) is an instructional strategy designed to activate and refine students' prior knowledge of a content topic through speaking, listening, writing, and reading. The GWP encompasses four main teaching objectives (7:3):

1) To activate and sample students' prior knowledge of a topic before they do any actual text reading.

2) To sample and evaluate students' written expression with respect to a variety of content areas.

3) To improve students' written expression through guided instruction in a variety of content areas.

4) To encourage the synthesis and retention of content area concepts through speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

In order to demonstrate the use of the GWP and the vocabulary teaching strategy, the content area of Physical Education and the specific sport of surfing will be considered. The surfing text for this hypothetical class is one by Hemmings (3) containing a general introduction to the sport followed by a more technical discussion for the neophyte surfer. Technical vocabulary used in the text includes such terms as: "rocker, rails, and fin" (3:53) which are characteristics of a surfboard, and "curl, tubed, rollercoaster, and wipeout" (3:99) which are aspects of waves and wave riding. The following teaching steps from the guided writing procedure can be used within the reading improvement program to ensure active comprehension of the surfing text.

Steps in the guided writing procedure

The GWP involves a series of specific procedures spanning several days of instruction consistent with the usual format of a content unit. The following sequential steps are essential to the success of the GWP within the reading improvement setting (7:4):

Day 1) Informal diagnosis of prior content knowledge and written expression

1. Have students comment on everything they currently know about a topic from one of their content areas (in this case, surfing in Physical Education).

2. Write down everything your students say verbatim on the board or overhead. College students might generate the following concepts and terms: "waves, wipeout, pipeline, log, wetsuit, leash" etc.

3. Have students decide on which ideas seem to be the major ones and which are details. Have students circle which ideas can be developed within one or two paragraphs. Organize these in an outline format.

4. Next, have students write two paragraphs using the displayed outline as a guide. Tell students this will be their "first draft."

5. Now have the students do their reading assignment in the surfing text (at home or in the reading lab).

6. Collect student paragraphs and analyze for ideas and organization, pattern of details, effective sentence structure, correct spelling and correct and effective punctuation. Do not write edits on the students' papers. Record this diagnostic information on a check list next to each student's name as in the following sample:

Writing Checklist

	Paragraph Structure		Effective Sentence Structure	Correct Spelling	Correct and Effective Punctuation
	Ideas and Organization	Patterns of			
Leon			✓	✓	
Maria	✓		✓		✓

In this example, Leon's first draft displayed adequate sentence structure and spelling, however, he needs to edit his writing to improve paragraph transition and punctuation. Maria simply needs to correct her spelling on the first draft.

Day 2) Teaching content and written expression

1. Display an illustrative student draft on the overhead (e.g. one with run-on sentences), along with the four items on the check list. Have students contribute ideas for editing this example.

2. Return student papers and have students use the displayed check list to edit and polish their first draft. They may include some content revisions based on their text reading.

3. Collect this second draft and compare to the diagnostic check list. After using this procedure for a period of time you should note an upward trend in the quality of students' comprehension and written expression across content areas.

4. Prior to a content area quiz or exam, a review strategy such as the one that follows can be used within the reading lab curriculum.

Developing Content Area Vocabulary

In order to extend and reinforce students thinking about the topic of surfing, the following vocabulary strategy advanced by Bean and Berrey (2) can be used as an extension of the guided writing procedure. Each technical vocabulary term from the surfing unit is listed on eight by five cards. The following are selected examples of some surfing terms students might be required to know in the Physical Education class: "fin, tubed, and wipeout." Students draw a number of random cards from the deck of index cards containing technical terms. With the aid of the Hemmings' (3) surfing text, each student then composes a question that might serve to cue a listener to the identification of each particular vocabulary term. Questions might focus on such semantic skills as the identification of words in context, categorization, spelling, analogy, experience clues, comparison-contrast, summary, and association.

Composing questions fosters creative and divergent thinking as well as providing essential overlearning of technical vocabulary and concepts. The following are hypothetical examples of student generated questions from the surfing text:

1. "Tubed"

   Text: "The experts riding waves at the Bonzai Pipeline are able to become so tubed that they disappear from sight behind the falling crest of the wave" (3:111).

   Student Question: What term describes a surfer who disappears from view in a wave? (context clue)

2. "Fin"

   Text: "The fin...functions exactly like the keel on a boat..." (3:60).

   Student Question: Keel is to boat as ____ is to surfboard? (analogy)

3. "Wipeout"

   Text: "Regretfully, this is the maneuver most successfully accomplished by the novice surfer, whether he has planned it or not" (3:114).

   Student Question: Unlike experienced surfers, beginning surfers frequently do this. (comparison-contrast)

   "etwpoitu" is a scrambled word for what? (spelling)

The technical vocabulary can now be reviewed in a brainstorming session within the reading lab. One student displays a vocabulary card (e.g. "wipeout") to others in a small group but he/she does not look at the card. The other students supply clues as to what the word might be (e.g. "Unlike experienced surfers, beginning surfers frequently do this"). Clues continue around the group until the person holding the word in question guesses what it is.

Both the guided writing procedure and the vocabulary brainstorming activity are effective approaches for enlarging and reinforcing the concepts and technical vocabulary college students need to know in order to be successful learners in their content area courses. More importantly, the use of content area material within the reading improvement program helps bridge the gap between general reading skills and the real world of the content area classroom.

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